



# DR AHEAD



THE AIR FORCE NAVIGATORS OBSERVERS ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

## LOW LEVEL IN THE PACIFIC by Robert J. Bucholz (Hondo 43-18)

A little history - I graduated from the Hondo, Texas, navigation school just before Christmas, 1943 in Class 43-18. Then I went on to the Roswell, New Mexico, bombardier school for another 3 months of training. Previously, in June & July of 1943, I had taken the Harlingen, Texas, gunnery school training. Just once, on leave in Cleveland, I strutted around town with all three of those wings attached to my uniform. We airmen were pretty proud of those wings.

After bombardier school, I had the choice of B-29 or B-25 crew training. I chose the latter, did the Columbia S.C. "wait" and went on to Greenville S.C. for 6 weeks of accelerated B-25 crew training. We flew day and night exercises - over water to the Bahamas and back, simulated strafing runs up winding Georgia rivers feet off the water, radio fixes and gunnery attack practice at Myrtle Beach S.C. and the like.

There were a few thrills along the way. Over the Atlantic and 50 miles offshore in the dark, on the edge of a storm, madly doing "follow the pilot navigation" while checking the Mae West & the chute harness and looking for a break in the storm. Finally a hole opened up & we dove to the ocean for a quick radio fix. This allowed us to determine a heading to Lake Murray - a great landmark - and an easy run home to Greenville.

In July 1944, we got a new B-25 at Hunter Field in Savannah Ga., delivered by those cute, cute lady WASPs. We spent a few days calibrating the air speed indicator, the compass, the drift meter, the sextant and the sextant shooting glass. Off we went to Amarillo and then to Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base. A few days later we received the early morning briefing, metro forecasts, zone and course plottings and gas. We were off on the "great adventure". Our first stop was John Rogers strip on Oahu, Hawaii. While there we had a few great meals at the "country club" - Hickham Field.

The trip had been a navigator's delight sextant sun lines gave us average ground speed, we got good drift readings at 9000 feet, we had good ETAs and sighting of two or three surface vessels that were used as intermediate radio check points. To prove that we were on course, we got Honolulu dead ahead on the radio-compass from 400 miles out. A very controlled flight since, even with auxillary rubber tanks, we had a 35 minute margin. A stiff unexpected headwind after the point of no return and it would have been all over. As it was, it took a long, long 12 hours. Pilot fatigue gave us a mighty hard landing on the Rogers strip, but fortunately there was no damage to the landing gear.

We had some challenging little hops from Hawaii to Christmas, Canton, Fiji and New Caledonia, enroute to quaint Townsville, Australia. Crew thrills included crossing the equator, the international date line and The Great Barrier Reef. From there on, it all seemed downhill. We languished for a few weeks in Port Moresby, New Guinea, with dysentery, repulsive food, flies and mosquitos.

We did have a few highlights. Part of one week we went out daily to meet Gen. MacArthur's C-54 over the Coral Sea, to escort it north as his headquarters moved from Brisbane to Hollandia, New Guinea. It was an interesting navigation interception exercise to find the C-54 over that

vast sea. We also made runs out over the ocean to test new shoreline radar equipment. We also took trips to Brisbane in rickety B-24s to ferry new aircraft north.

One night I was recruited by a pilot to navigate a B-25 from Port Moresby to Nadzab. We made a midnight takeoff with one good map and my E6B for ETA, with just the two of us in the aircraft. After takeoff, I discovered that fuel was pouring out of our right wing tank - a ground crewman had apparently forgotten to secure the fuel cap. We returned to base, chewed out the crew chief, refueled and departed at 0100. We went up to 10,000 feet in the moonlight and did sort of an inland landfall, doing pilotage off of prominent mountain peaks. We did a big right turn and hit our ETA over Nadzab. But there was heavy cloud cover below and lots of mountain threats around us. After a half-hour of circling, I saw a hole in the clouds and twinkling lights below. It had to be Nadzab. We dove through that hole like a fighter and finally landed. We found sacks for a few hours of rest and flew back to Port Moresby after sunrise. Now, how could you turn down a pilot who needed a navigator for a midnight flight?

Eventually our crew found its way to the island of Biak where we joined the 38th BG. The second day there we had a mission to Morotai in the Halmaheras. It seems we were to spread insecticide up and down the beach for MacArthur's landing a few days later - no bugs for the invaders. We hit a big front; it was socked in from the ground to 20,000 feet. We had to abort so there was no bug juice for MacArthur's boys - and no mission credit.

The third day there, I was summoned to Headquarters and told I was to do temporary duty (TDY) with the 3rd Attack Group ( Grim Reapers ) in A-20s. They were assigned a number of 9,000 - foot missions to Japanese strips in westernmost New Guinea and they needed a rated navigator - bombardier to fly in a Norden-equipped B-25 that would lead the A-20s to their target. I got about 6 such milk run missions - two-to-3-minute bomb runs in smooth air with no hostile AA or aircraft. We kept the Japanese strips full of chuckholes to prevent any surpris visits from them.

I hung on with the 3rd Group, still TDY. They outfitted a number of A-20s so I could ride with them on missions. They cut a body-sized hole in the life raft shelf behind the pilot and mounted a sling seat below this hole for me. I used the bombs in the bomb bay as foot rests. Since this was a strafing outfit, navigation was almost always pilotage.

We had moved north to Leyte in the Philippine Island and finally to Mindoro. We ranged north, east and south doing alot of ground troop support action. Sometimes I was with the Group or squadron leader, peeking around his head to check the airspeed and compass headings. The 38th BG never did ask for my return, and eventually I was transferred to the 3rd Attack Group. I got in 53 missions with the finest, sharpest low level pilots you could ever find. We had few losses with our *Bang, Bang, in and out and gone strategy*.

By July of 1945 we received our new Douglas A-26 Invaders. This was a really souped up A-20. It had 14 .50 caliber guns forward, a large bomb capacity, more powerful engines, a higher cruising speed, excellent single-engine performance, and a seat in the cockpit for the navigator. We all fell in love with this ship.

My last two missions, each of 8 hours in duration, were in the A-26 to railroad yards and industrial plants in southern Formosa. We did these missions right down in the smoke, railroad ties and rails. Probably the most thrilling two or three minutes of my tour.

Finally done! The Group C.O. offered me a spot in Headquarters, but I really didn't want to be beside him in the first big mission into Japan. So I opted for a twenty-two day boat trip home and discharge.

I stayed in the Reserves and missed Korea by a whisker. The 3rd Attack Group stayed on in Japan, and eventually had a big role in the Korean War chasing trucks, trains and tunnels in their A-26s. It turned out to be tough duty - low-level night attacks under flares in pretty wild terrain. I'm not sorry that I missed it.

Well, that's another Air Force saga of one navigator-bombardier who had a unique overseas tour in three different aircraft. Short of fighter-plane duty, it was some of the most thrilling and exhilarating flying that anyone could have. We missed the enemy plane action and some of the AA, but we made up for it with high-speed target runs only inches above the treetops.

Robert J. "Bob" Bucholz